



Race excluded as WH rolls out climate justice screening tool

By DREW COSTLEY
AP Science Writer

The Biden administration on Friday released a screening tool to help identify disadvantaged communities long plagued by environmental hazards, but it won't include race as a factor in deciding where to devote resources.

Administration officials told reporters that excluding race will make projects less likely to draw legal challenges and will be easier to defend, even as they acknowledged that race has been a major factor in terms of who experiences environmental injustice. The decision was harshly challenged by members of the environmental justice community.

justice community.

"It's a major disappointment and it's a major flaw in trying to identify those communities that have been hit hardest by pollution," said Robert Bullard, a professor of urban planning and environmental policy at Texas Southern University in Houston and a member of the White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council. President Joe Biden has made combating climate change a priority of his administration and pledged in a sweeping executive order to "deliver environmental justice in communities all across America."

Continued on next page



Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Michael Regan during an event with President Joe Biden at the Shipyards, Thursday, Feb. 17, 2022, in Lorain, Ohio.

Associated Press

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Continued from Front

The order, signed his first week in office, sets a goal that the 40% of overall benefits from climate and environment investments would go to disadvantaged communities. The tool is a key component for carrying out that so-called Justice40 Initiative.

Brenda Mallory, chair of the White House's Council on Environmental Quality, said the tool will help direct federal investments in climate, clean energy and environmental improvements to communities "that have been left out and left behind for far too long."

Catherine Coleman Flowers, a member of the advisory council who served on a working group that gave the Biden administration recommendations for the tool, said she agrees with the move to exclude race as an indicator.

She called the tool a good start that will likely improve with time and said including race as a factor risked having the tool struck down by the Supreme Court.

"Race is a factor, but race isn't the only factor," she said. "Being marginalized in others ways is a factor."

The screening tool uses 21 factors, including air pollu-



Brenda Mallory, the Biden administration's nominee for Chair of the Council on Environmental Quality, speaks at The Queen Theater in Wilmington Del., on Dec. 19, 2020.

Associated Press

tion, health outcomes and economic status, to identify communities that are most vulnerable to environmental and economic injustice. But the omission of race as a factor goes against a deep body of scientific research showing that race is the greatest determinant of who experiences environmental harm, environmental justice experts pointed out.

"This was a political deci-

sion," said Sacoby Wilson, associate professor at the University of Maryland School of Public Health. "This was not a scientific decision or a data-driven decision." Wilson has studied the distribution of environmental pollutants and helped develop mapping tools like the one the Council on Environmental Quality released Friday.

"How can the White House address environmental

racism without addressing race?" the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice asked in a tweet. The New Orleans-based group works to help families harmed by decades of industrial pollution in the Gulf Coast region.

"Time and time again, data has clearly shown that African-Americans disproportionately live in communities with higher pollutants than other races of peo-

ple," the group said.

The center's executive director, Beverly Wright, helped organize a "Journey to Justice" tour by EPA Administrator Michael Regan last fall. The weeklong tour focused on low-income, mostly minority communities in Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas and led to a series of enforcement actions by the EPA to address air pollution, unsafe drinking water and other problems afflicting minority communities in the Gulf Coast and nationwide.

This isn't the first such tool to exist in the United States, or even in the federal government. California, Maryland, Michigan and New Jersey have had tools like this for years. And the Environmental Protection Agency has a similar tool, EJ Screen. Many of those screening tools include some information about the racial makeup of communities along with environmental and health data.

The public has 60 days to use the tool and provide feedback on it. The CEQ also announced Friday that the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine are working on launching a study of existing tools. □

Congress eyes more financial disclosure for federal judges



Sen. Chris Coons, D-Del., speaks at the COP26 U.N. Climate Summit in Glasgow, Scotland, Nov. 6, 2021.

Associated Press

By BRIAN SLODYSKO

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal judges would have to publicly disclose more about their finances under a bill approved by the Senate this week, which aims to make the judiciary subject to similar transparency requirements as lawmak-

ers.

The bipartisan bill by Sens. John Cornyn, R-Texas, and Chris Coons, D-Del., is intended to make it easier for the public to find out if a judge's financial holdings could pose a conflict of interest in a case they are presiding over.

The measure was approved

by a voice vote Thursday and now goes to the House for consideration.

The effort comes as judges have faced increased scrutiny for failing to recuse themselves from matters in which they could have an interest, like stock ownership in a company that is part of a case before them. Federal judges are required to file annual disclosures. But those documents are not readily available to the public without filing a written request. Even then, the judge must first be notified. It can take months — and potentially far longer — to obtain the filings.

The financial disclosures of lawmakers and congressional candidates, on the other hand, are posted online. And under a 2012 law known as the Stock Act, lawmakers must also file reports within 45 days after

selling holdings like company stock, which judges don't have to do.

"Federal judges should never have been excluded from the Stock Act's disclosure requirements, and this oversight has resulted in conflicts of interest that erode public trust in our judiciary," said Cornyn.

The legislation could come into play as Congress debates new financial ethics rules for lawmakers, including a ban on owning stocks. Public anger over congressional trading has mounted since the first tremors of the pandemic, when some lawmakers were caught buying and selling millions of dollars worth of stock after being warned about the coming disruption from the virus. A number of the trades were probed by the Justice Department, though no lawmakers have

been charged.

A handful of bills have been introduced to limit lawmakers' ability to hold stock. But some powerful figures in Congress have said they would prefer a more targeted approach, like increased penalties, than an outright ban.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has said that any legislative push should also address judges.

"The judiciary has no reporting of stock transactions and it makes important decisions everyday," Pelosi told reporters this month, referring to the periodic reports lawmakers must make when they buy or sell stocks, which comes on top of their required annual financial disclosures. "We have to do this to deter something that we see as a problem. It is a confidence issue." □

National Archives: Trump took classified items to Mar-a-Lago

WASHINGTON (AP) — Classified information was found in the 15 boxes of White House records that were stored at former President Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago residence, the National Archives and Records Administration said Friday in a letter that confirmed the matter has been sent to the Justice Department.

The letter from the agency follows numerous reports around Trump's handling of sensitive and even classified information during his time as president and after he left the White House. The revelation could also interest federal investigators responsible for policing the handling of government secrets, though the Justice Department and FBI have not indicated they will pursue.

Federal law bars the removal of classified documents to unauthorized locations, though it is possible that Trump could try to argue that, as president, he was the ultimate declassification authority.

No matter the legal risk, it exposes him to charges of hypocrisy given his relentless attacks during the 2016 presidential campaign on Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton for her use of a private email server as secretary of state. The FBI investigated but ultimately did not recommend charges.



In this Jan. 6, 2021, photo, President Donald Trump arrives to speak at a rally in Washington. Associated Press

Trump recently denied reports about his administration's tenuous relationship with the National Archives and his lawyers said that "they are continuing to search for additional presidential records that belong to the National Archives."

The letter from the archivists in response to the House Committee on Oversight and Reform, which is investigating, also details how certain social media

records were not captured and preserved by the Trump administration. And it also says that the agency learned that White House staff frequently conducted official business using unofficial messaging accounts and personal phones.

Those staff did not copy or forward their official messaging counts, as required

by the Presidential Records Act. The letter also goes on to reveal that after Trump left the White House, the National Archives learned that additional paper records that had been torn up by the former president had been transferred to the agency.

"Although White House staff during the Trump Administration recovered and taped together some of the torn-up records, a number of other torn-up records that were transferred had not been reconstructed by the White House," the letter continued.

Lawmakers are also seeking information about the contents of the boxes recovered from Mar-a-Lago but the agency cited the records act as holding them back from divulging.

Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., the chairwoman of the Oversight Committee, said in a statement Friday that "these new revelations deepen my concern about former President Trump's flagrant disregard for federal records law and the potential impact on our historical record."

□

U.S., Britain accuse Russia of cyberattacks targeting Ukraine

By ERIC TUCKER

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House blamed Russia on Friday for this week's cyberattacks targeting Ukraine's defense ministry and major banks and warned of the potential for more significant disruptions in the days ahead.

Anne Neuberger, the Biden administration's deputy national security adviser for cyber and emerging technologies, said the U.S. had rapidly linked Tuesday's attacks to Russian military intelligence officers.

Britain joined the U.S. in blaming the GRU military intelligence agency for the distributed denial-of-service attacks that unfolded as tensions escalate between Russia and Ukraine. The attacks, which knocked government websites and a couple of major banks offline for

much of the day, were of "limited impact" since Ukrainian officials were able to quickly get their systems back up and running, Neuberger said.

But she said the Russians could also be laying the groundwork for more disruptive activities that could accompany an invasion of Ukraine.

"We do expect that should Russia decide to proceed with a further invasion of Ukraine, we may see further destabilizing or destructive cyber activity, and we've been working closely with allies and partners to ensure we're prepared to call out that behavior and respond," Neuberger said.

She said the U.S. was publicly blaming the Kremlin because of a need to "call out the behavior quickly."

"The global community must be prepared to shine

a light on malicious cyber activity and hold actors accountable for any and all disruptive or destructive cyber activity," Neuberger said.

The British Foreign Office said the attack "showed a continued disregard for Ukrainian sovereignty. This activity is yet another example of Russia's aggressive acts against Ukraine." Neuberger said there was no intelligence indicating that the U.S. would be targeted by a cyberattack, but that remained a concern, giving that the banking system does not have the "cyber resilience" that it should.

Ukrainian officials called Tuesday's attacks the worst in the country's history. But while they definitely disrupted online banking, impeded some government-to-public communications



Anne Neuberger, Deputy National Security Advisor for Cyber and Emerging Technology, speaks with reporters in the James Brady Press Briefing Room at the White House, Friday, Feb. 18, 2022, in Washington.

Associated Press

and were clearly intended to cause panic, they were not particularly serious by global or historic standards, said Roland Dobbins, the top engineer for DDoS at the cybersecurity firm Netscout.

"Most DDoS attacks suc-

ceed due to the lack of preparation on the part of the defenders," said Dobbins, adding that most commercial mitigation services designed to counter such attacks would likely have been able to fend off Tuesday's attacks. □

Kim Potter sentenced to 2 years in Daunte Wright's death

By AMY FORLITI, STEVE KARNOWSKI and TAMMY WEBER

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Kim Potter, the former suburban Minneapolis police officer who said she confused her handgun for her Taser when she fatally shot Daunte Wright, was sentenced Friday to two years in prison. Wright's family denounced the sentence as too lenient and accused the judge of giving more consideration to the white officer than the Black victim.

Potter was convicted in December of first- and second-degree manslaughter in the April 11 killing of Wright, a 20-year-old Black motorist. She was sentenced only on the more serious charge in accordance with state law.

Wright's mother, Katie Wright, said after the sentencing that Potter "murdered my son," adding: "Today the justice system murdered him all over again." She also accused the judge of being taken in by "white woman's tears" after Potter cried during her pre-sentencing statement. Speaking before the sentence was imposed, a tearful Wright said she could never forgive Potter and that she would refer to her only as "the defendant" because Potter only referred to her son as "the driver" at trial.

"She never once said his name. And for that I'll never be able to forgive you. And I'll never be able to forgive you for what you've stolen from us," said Wright, who also sometimes uses the last name Bryant.

"Daunte Demetrius Wright, I will continue to fight in your name until driving while Black is no longer a death sentence," she said.

Potter offered an apology to Wright's family, then spoke directly to his mother: "Katie, I understand a mother's love. I'm sorry I broke your heart ... my heart is broken and devastated for all of you."

The judge, who imposed a sentence below state guidelines, called it "one of the saddest cases I've had on my 20 years on the



In this screen grab from video, former Brooklyn Center Police Officer Kim Potter speaks during a sentencing hearing Feb. 18, 2022 at the Hennepin County Courthouse in Minneapolis.

Associated Press

bench." Judge Regina Chu said she received "hundreds and hundreds" of letters in support of Potter. "On the one hand, a young man was killed and on the other, a respected 26-year veteran police officer made a tragic error by pulling her handgun instead of her Taser."

Chu said the lesser sentence was warranted because Potter was "in the line of duty and doing her job in attempting to lawfully arrest Daunte Wright," and Potter was trying to protect another officer who could have been dragged and seriously injured if Wright drove away.

The judge said Potter will serve the standard two-thirds of her sentence, or 16 months in prison, with the rest on parole. She has earned credit for 58 days that she has been in the state's women's prison in Shakopee since the guilty verdict.

Wright was killed after Brooklyn Center officers pulled him over for having expired license tags and an air freshener hanging from his rearview mirror. Civil rights advocates complain that laws against hanging objects from rearview mirrors have been used as a pretext for stopping Black

motorists.

The shooting, which happened as Derek Chauvin was on trial in Minneapolis on murder charges in George Floyd's killing, sparked several days of demonstrations outside the Brooklyn Center police station marked by tear gas and clashes between protesters and police.

Potter and Chauvin were convicted in the same courtroom.

Wright family attorney Ben Crump said the family was stunned by the sentence, saying they didn't understand why such consideration was given to a white officer in the killing of a young Black man when a Black officer, Mohamed Noor, got a longer sentence in 2017 for the killing of a white woman, Justine Ruszczyk Damond.

"What we see today is the legal system in Black and white."

But the judge said the case was not the same as other high-profile killings by police.

"This is not a cop found guilty of murder for using his knee to pin down a person for 9 1/2 minutes as he gasped for air. This is not a cop found guilty of manslaughter for intentionally drawing his firearm and

shooting across his partner and killing an unarmed woman who approached his squad," said Chu, referring to Chauvin and Noor. "This is a cop who made a tragic mistake."

For someone with no criminal history, such as Potter, the state guidelines on first-degree manslaughter range from slightly more than six years to about 8 1/2 years in prison, with the presumptive sentence being just over seven years.

Prosecutors initially argued that aggravating factors warranted a sentence above the guideline range, saying Potter abused her authority as an officer and that her actions caused a greater-than-normal danger to others. But on Friday, Prosecutor Matt Frank said the presumptive sentence was proper.

"His life mattered, and that life was taken," Frank said before sentencing. "His name is Daunte Wright. We have to say his name. He was not just a driver. He was a living human being. A life."

Defense attorney Paul Engh asked for a sentence below the guidelines, including probation only, arguing that Wright was the aggressor. He said the testimony of other officers on

the scene showed it was a dangerous situation because Wright was attempting to drive away and Potter had the right to defend other officers.

Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison, whose office prosecuted the case, said he accepts the sentence and urged others to do the same.

People should remember Daunte Wright and "know that no number of years in prison could ever capture the wonder of this young man's life," Ellison said in a statement.

But, he said, the sentence doesn't take away from "the truth of the jury's verdict."

Engh told the judge that Wright's death was "beyond tragic for everybody involved." But, he added: "This was an unintentional crime. It was an accident. It was a mistake."

Engh said if Potter were to receive probation, she would be willing to meet with Wright's family and to speak to police officers about Taser mix-ups, as suggested by prosecutors.

Engh also held up a box displaying what he said were among "thousands" of letters and cards of support for Potter. "People took the time to write her," Engh said. "This is unheard of for a defendant. I dare say no one in this room has ever seen anything like this."

Evidence at Potter's trial showed officers learned he had an outstanding warrant for a weapons possession charge and they tried to arrest him when he pulled away. Video showed Potter shouted several times that she was going to use her Taser on Wright, but she had her gun in her hand and fired one shot into his chest.

Wright's father and siblings also addressed the court to speak of their loss.

The mother of Wright's son, Chyna Whitaker, said Friday that Wright would never have a chance to play ball with his son, or see him go to school.

"My son shouldn't have to wear a 'rest in peace' shirt of his dad," Whitaker said. □

U.S. paves way for resumption of Mexico avocado exports

MEXICO CITY (AP) — The U.S. Embassy announced Friday that Washington is lifting a ban on inspections of Mexican avocados, freeing the way for exports to resume.

The suspension of inspections had threatened Mexico's \$3 billion annual exports and raised the possibility of prices increases for U.S. consumers.

Ambassador Ken Salazar said in a statement the decision came after Mexico and the United States agreed "to enact the measures that ensure the safety" of agricultural inspectors who are in charge of making sure Mexican avocados don't carry diseases or pests that would harm U.S. orchards.

Salazar did not describe those measures or whether they would address reports of Mexican growers and packers playing fast and loose with sanitary measures designed to protect U.S. production.

The inspections were halted last week after one of the U.S. inspectors was threatened in the western state of Michoacan, where growers are routinely subject to extortion by drug cartels.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture said Thursday that the inspector had received a threat "against him and his family."

It said the inspector had "questioned the integrity of a certain shipment, and refused to certify it based on concrete issues."

Michoacan is the only Mexican state certified as pest-free and able to export avocados to the U.S. market. There have been frequent reports that some packers in Mexico are buying avocados from other, non-certified states, and trying to pass them off as being from Michoacan.

"I am pleased to report that today the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal Plant Health Inspection Service has determined it will immediately resume its avocado inspection program in Michoacán," Salazar wrote.

The service said Friday



A worker selects avocados at a packing plant in Uruapan, Mexico, Wednesday, Feb. 16, 2022.

Associated Press

that "avocado exports to the United States have resumed."

The week-old ban had already been taking a toll on avocado pickers in Michoacan, who stood on a roadside this week outside the city of Uruapan asking for donations after they lost their work.

Holding up signs saying "Voluntary donations" and "We make our living off avocado picking," they waited for motorists to drop spare change into buckets they held.

There were signs that supplies may have tightened since the inspection suspension was announced last Saturday and that the damage to Mexico's violence-plagued avocado industry may be lasting: It could prompt companies that import avocados to look beyond Mexico, which currently supplies about 92% of U.S. imports of the fruit.

Peru, Colombia and Chile already ship avocados to the United States, but in quantities that are only a tiny fraction of Mexico's production. That may change.

"I was talking with a few buyers of avocado domestically, and on toward the future, they they know they need to diversify suppliers," said Miguel Gómez, professor of applied economics

and management in the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business. "The issue is that they realized that it would be very risky to depend on a single source." Exports from Mexico were

largely responsible for the huge increase in U.S. avocado consumption in recent decades because they made the fruit available year-round, most famously during the Super

Bowl.

U.S. per capita consumption of avocados tripled since 2001 to 8 pounds per person in 2018.

The Mexican harvest is January through March, while U.S. production runs from April to September.

While there is concern about the deforestation and violence that have resulted from the avocado boom in Michoacan, it is unclear whether Americans would be willing to pay more for avocados produced by growers who do not pay protection money demanded by drug cartels in Michoacan.

"It's requiring Americans to really ask themselves, do they want to pay more to have a quality product or do they want to kind of look the other way and be able to slice their toast accordingly?" said Desirée LeClerc, a professor of employment law at Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations. □



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Afghanistan's Taliban detain Brits, American; reason unclear

By KATHY GANNON
Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP)—Afghanistan's Taliban rulers have detained several British citizens and an American, including a former freelance television journalist who has been coming to Afghanistan for more than 40 years, both governments and a family member say.

A statement from the British government this week said there are a number of British nationals currently in Taliban custody.

While the government refused to release their identities, Hassina Syed, the wife of Peter Jouvenal, a former freelance cameraman turned businessman, told The Associated Press, her husband was taken on Dec. 13.

And U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told CNN's "State of the Union" on Sunday that Washington was "actively working" to get the American released from Taliban custody. He refused to say more, citing the "sensitivity of it."

The American detainee and at least four other British nationals in custody remain publicly unidentified. It was not clear how many were detained together.

Speaking to The AP by



This photo provided by David Loyn shows Peter Jouvenal at the Frontline Club in London in 2017. Associated Press

phone from her home in London, Syed, an Afghan, said her husband was in Afghanistan investigating business opportunities, including investment in lithium mining. Afghanistan is rich in lithium, a key component of energy-storage batteries. He was traveling alone and not associated with the other detainees, she said.

Jouvenal had worked as a

freelance cameraman during the 1980s Soviet invasion in Afghanistan and followed the country through its many wars. He married Syed and they have three daughters.

Jouvenal, who speaks both Pashto and Dari, Afghanistan's two official languages, had held several meetings with the Taliban's mining ministry before being detained in December,

Syed said, including with the minister.

No charges have been filed and until his detention, Syed said, Jouvenal had been careful to stay in regular contact with the Taliban authorities to ensure that they were aware of his activities and movements. In the mid 2000s, Jouvenal owed and operated the Gandamak Restaurant and guest house in

the Afghan capital, which had become well known among the many journalists who traveled to Afghanistan during the U.S.-led invasion that toppled the Taliban government in 2001.

The Taliban did not respond to requests for comment on the foreign nationals and on Jouvenal in particular.

In a statement, the British foreign office said the detention of British nationals is being discussed with the Taliban.

"UK officials have raised their detention with the Taliban at every opportunity, including when a delegation travelled to Kabul last week," the British foreign office said in a statement earlier this week.

There's been no explanation for the detentions.

Syed said her husband was alone and was not traveling with the other men who have been detained.

According to people with direct knowledge of the men currently being held in Taliban custody, at least two of the detainees were apparently in Afghanistan to secretly evacuate Afghan nationals. The people with direct knowledge spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the talks. □

Indian court sentences 38 to death for fatal 2008 bombings

By ASHOK SHARMA
Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP)—A court in India on Friday sentenced to death 38 people for a series of bomb blasts

in 2008 that left more than 50 dead in Gujarat state, which has a history of violent clashes between Hindus and Muslims.

It was the first time that so

many accused have received death sentences in a single case in India. The sentences must be confirmed by a higher court. The attacks in Ahmedabad 13 years ago underscored communal tensions that are still reverberating in India.

A militant Islamic group called Harkat-ul-Jihad-Islami claimed responsibility for the bombings. It was considered to be Pakistani-based but apparently is no longer active.

The Indian Mujahideen, a radicalized faction of the banned Students Islamic Movement of India, also was involved, said Sudhir Brahmhatt, a government prosecutor in the case, citing police documents.

The group planned the ex-

plosions as revenge for the 2002 Hindu-Muslim violence in Gujarat in which more than 1,000 people, most of them Muslims, were killed, the Press Trust of India news agency said. It was some of the worst religious violence India has seen since its independence from Britain in 1947.

The unrest was triggered by a fire on a train packed with Hindu pilgrims that killed 60 passengers. The cause was never proven, but Hindu extremists blamed the deaths on Muslims and reacted by rampaging through Muslim areas.

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the chief minister the top elected official of Gujarat at the time. There were long-standing allegations that he didn't

do enough to stop the devastating religious riots. He has denied the accusations.

On Friday, Judge A. R. Patel also sentenced 11 people to life imprisonment in the case in which more than a dozen bombs went off in several parts of Ahmedabad on July 26, 2008.

All the 49 convicts are Muslims, Brahmhatt said, adding that only one Hindu was arrested and acquitted by the court.

The judge described the case as the "rarest of rare," Arvind Patel, another prosecutor, told reporters.

A group of people lit firecrackers and distributed sweets, hailing the verdict at one of the blast sites in Ahmedabad in western India. □



Nine men, wearing black hoods to conceal their identity, arrested by the Ahmedabad crime branch for allegedly conducting a series of bombings, are shown to the media in Ahmedabad, India, Saturday, Aug. 16, 2008.

Associated Press

Protests grow in Puerto Rico amid demands for higher wages

By DÁNICA COTO

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP)

— Shrill whistles mixed with drums, tambourines and the clacking of spoons on pots as public employees shut down streets in Puerto Rico's capital Friday to demand better pay and pensions.

The crowd shimmied and clapped as demonstrators held up signs reading, "Fair wages now!"

It's a call that has echoed across Puerto Rico in recent weeks as government employees and supporters take to the streets, emboldened by thousands of public school teachers who abandoned classrooms in early February to demand raises and better pensions. Protests have multiplied and the unrest is posing one of the biggest challenges for Gov. Pedro Pierluisi a year into his term.

"The people kicked the U.S. military out of Vieques. They kicked out a governor. We can make this happen," said Abner Dumey, who teaches history in the northern town of Naranjito. Legislators are the only public workers who have an automatic cost-of-living increase for their salaries. Most of the U.S. territory's other public employees have not gotten pay raises in more than a decade sometimes two as the cost of living has risen and the island has suffered a lengthy economic crisis and a government bankruptcy in the aftermath of deadly hurricanes, earthquakes and the pandemic.

Power and water bills are nearly 60% higher in Puerto Rico than the U.S. average. Groceries are 18% more expensive than on the mainland, although health care and housing costs, among others, are lower, according to the island's Institute of Statistics.

Marcia Rivera, an economist and sociologist whose research focuses largely on poverty and inequality, said government workers are grappling with rising prices while getting the same salaries they had in 2008.

"They're fed up," she said.



Demonstrators from the public education sector march to Fortaleza street to demand better salaries, adequate pensions and better employment conditions, in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Wednesday, Feb. 9, 2022.

Many public employees work one or two additional jobs to make ends meet. Carlos Javier Vázquez, for one, is a paramedic in the mountain town of Barranquitas, and he also teaches emergency medicine and operates an ambulance company to help support his wife and four children. It's a life that is exhausting and not sustainable, he said.

But with paramedics in Puerto Rico earning a base salary of \$1,725 a month, he said he has no choice. "It's extremely difficult to survive on that."

In an attempt to quell the demonstrations, the governor promised teachers a \$1,000 monthly increase just days after 70% of them walked out of their classrooms in protest earlier this month.

He expanded the offer to school principals, regional superintendents and others just days later.

Shortly afterward, he promised a \$500 monthly increase for firefighters and a 30% raise for paramedics. Pierluisi's actions only fanned anger among other government employees, with some demanding their own pay increases as others fumed over the governor's recent comment

that no one is forced to become a firefighter or police officer.

A problem is that all those increases promised by Pierluisi rely on federal funds that expire in upcoming years, and many people did not believe the governor when he promised to find local funds to make the increases permanent. That promise also worried economists. Puerto Rican leaders are trying to restructure a \$70 billion public debt following decades of mismanagement, corruption and excessive borrowing that forced the government to declare the largest municipal bankruptcy in U.S. history in 2017, just months before Hurricane Maria battered the island. "It's highly irresponsible," said Antonio Fernós, a Puerto Rico economist and university professor who believes the government is unable to make the increases permanent. "It's Public Finance 101 of what not to do."

Fernós said one of the key things that made the government go bankrupt was to use temporary funding for fixed costs.

"They certainly haven't learned their lesson yet," he said.

"Puerto Rico is the poster

child for government finances mismanagement. This is the worst timing for all wage earners."

Rivera, the poverty researcher, agreed, saying no salary increase should be authorized without having a financial policy in place.

She added that the governor should not manage affairs by responding to yelling.

"He has opened Pandora's box," she said. "He cannot meet all the demand that he himself generated."

Pierluisi's announcement came just weeks after the federal control board that oversees Puerto Rico's finances approved a fiscal plan that contained smaller pay increases for teachers, firefighters and other employees.

It said the government's financial state did not allow for more.

The governor has said a new compensation plan will go into effect next year and bring higher wages for thousands of public employees, yet he also says he won't be able to raise the pay of all public workers.

"I obviously cannot please everyone," he said Wednesday. "That is impossible."

That same day, he an-

nounced a 30% pay increase for dispatchers and medical emergency technicians including paramedics. On Thursday, he announced a \$500 monthly increase for prison officers.

And while economists are warning about the lack of financing, union leaders say the promised increases are only a good first step. They say more is needed and complain that the government is cutting pension benefits and raising the retirement age.

Wanda Ramos, a special education teacher in Caguas, said the pension she is to get upon retirement is being cut from \$2,400 a month to \$960. She said she struggles now after not getting a raise in 12 years.

"I can only buy the essentials. I never have a full fridge," Ramos said, adding that a hefty portion of her salary goes to paying her daughter's college education.

Migdalia Santiago, who is also a special education teacher, said she faces similar struggles.

"Pay the lights, you don't pay water," she said.

Public school teachers in Puerto Rico earn a base salary of \$1,750 a month and are demanding a minimum of \$3,500. Meanwhile, firefighters earn a base salary of \$1,500 a month and are seeking \$2,500 and an improved pension plan.

Union leader José Tirado said firefighters previously could retire at age 55 after 30 years of service with up to 75% of their salary.

Now, the minimum retirement age is 58 and they get only 33% of their salary, he said.

"The quality of life, with those salaries they earn, is a misery," Tirado said. □

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LOCAL



Get it ALL done at Do It Center and Super Do It Center & Groceries

Noord – Sometimes all we need is one place where we can do all our shopping at once. Well, Do it center and Super Do it Center Groceries has it all. This is the largest, local owned Do it Center in the Caribbean and best of all a 100% locally owned family business.

How it all began

It was 1938 when Mr. Eric Ponson started his journey at General Store. Ponson did not hesitate and decided to buy General Store. Buying a store and thus going from employee to owner of a business with a debt of 11.000 guilders was not an easy task.

As the saying goes: "Behind every successful man, is a strong woman". In the case of Ponson, this was no different. As General Store progressed and slowly became successful, Mrs. Irene Ponson, came in to assist her husband. Irene Ponson is a visionary, she knew exactly where and how to invest and within a short amount of time in 1970, General Store moved to a better location at the Steenweg. This allowed for a lot more merchandise, products and employees. Supply and demand was as such, that General Store became the number 1 electrical business. The place where you went to find bulbs, cables, outlets or any other electrical equipment you needed. Business kept going so well that the location at the Steenweg became too small and was moved later to Dakota Shopping Paradise and later to Pedro Gallego Straat. With this move, an expansion was decided upon and an electronics store in Savaneta was opened. General Store still being very successful was ready for more growth.

Ricky, Kenneth, Corine and Frans are the fruits of this marriage. They worked at their parent's side every day until they were ready to go abroad to study. It was in their backyard that all containers were stalled. This is why all four children know everything there is to know about the business. Kenneth and Frans however, decided to further develop their father's legacy and continued with their mother's dream to expand the business. An expansion not in square feet only, but in merchandise as well. A great opportunity presented itself when the Ponson family was able to buy a piece of property across from the airport. In 2007 the Ponson family moved into their brand new and huge building. Pon-



son's General Store now had an electrical department, a housewares department, a paint department and a hardware department.

After a successful opening and expansion, Kenneth and Frans who inherited their mother's vision, decided General Store was ready for yet another expansion. Together with investors a visibility report was drafted, which resulted in Noord being a very good location for another store. The search for a well located property commenced. Soon after the purchase, with the support of Mr. Tom Barfell and management of Do it Best in the States, the construction of Do it Center commenced. Mrs. Claudia Ponson, Kenneth's wife, was the mastermind behind the interior decoration, making sure the interior of the store was according to the Do it Best guidelines.

Fast forward to today. A Do it Center in Aruba, with more than 50,000 top of the line items for interior as well as exterior use, building materials, STO products and a top of the line grocery store. Perseverance, responsibility, vision and the courage to invest have made Ponson's General Store as successful as it is today.

Super Do It Center Shaba & Groceries

Located in Shaba, Noord. This is the last sibling of the Do It Center family. Here you will be able to find anything you are looking for. The building is divided into several departments from home to hardware to groceries. Everything under one roof.

Groceries? Visit the fully stocked supermarket with fresh fruits and vegetables and high class meat selections. Highly known products and



brands are here for you to grab. Every week Do It Center Groceries offers you great discount on selected items. Weekly specials are very popular and a perfect chance for you to buy your favorite products at a reduced price.

Need a home makeover? Do not skip the furniture department "Leenbakker". Here, you will find a divine collection of European furniture, worldwide known for their modern and stylish features for your bedroom, bathroom, living room or kitchen. For your garden they have a wide selection of durable furniture specially made for our tropical climate. Take a walk around and find some treasures. Find the perfect accessory for your house, fitted for your personality and style. Modern, elegant, retro industrial, whatever your style is you will definitely find something for your personal taste.

Feeling hungry? Take a break and relax at the 'Deli'. Savor a delicious lunch or a sandwich with a cup of coffee or perhaps a wrap. If you are a sweet tooth you will not be able to just skip the great variety of desserts they have. So tempting!

Do it Center Shaba is open from Mon to Sat from 8AM to 8PM and closed on Sunday

Do It Center Camacuri

Do it Center Camacuri as mentioned before was the first official building of the Do It Center family. After serving the community for many years as a multipurpose facility this was recently transformed to a department specially designated for contractors services only. Open from Mon to Fri from 7.30AM to 6PM. On Sat from 7.30AM- 4PM and closed on Sunday.

Do It Center Savaneta

This location is the baby of the family. Here you will also be able to find everything for your home and garden and building materials to build or renovate your home. Just drive into the 'Lumber Drive-Thru' and the experts will help you with everything you need. Open from Mon to Fri from 8AM to 6PM, SAT, 10AM-4PM and closed on Sunday.

For more information go to www.doit.aw □



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Covid Test Center at Paseo has the best experience!

PALM BEACH-Don't spend a single moment of your long awaited holiday in Aruba thinking about your return testing. The Covid Test Center Aruba located at the Paseo Herencia Mall is your travel ally. Just sit back and relax knowing that, when the time comes, their professional staff will make this process a breeze for you. No need to make an appointment or dread the nasal swab; you'll be done with it in a matter of minutes and back to fun stuff.

Some regions require proof or certification of negative COVID-19 status before allowing people into or out of the country. With rules and guidelines varying greatly from country to country, the safest approach is to have recent proof you are COVID-19 negative before you get to the airport. Covid Test Center @ Paseo provides both PCR and Antigen type testing with results within hours; and both are accepted by the CDC.

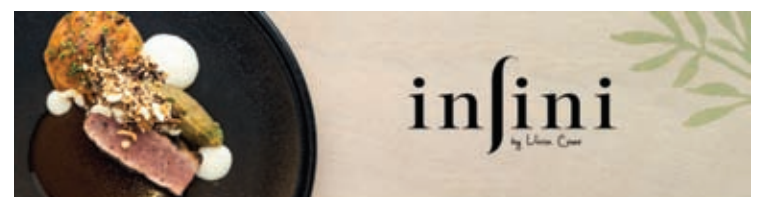
Covid Test Center @ Paseo is conveniently located at the Paseo Herencia Mall in the heart of the Palm Beach Strip and right across from the Playa Linda and Holiday Inn hotels; only two doors from T.G.I. Friday's. We are open seven days a week, between 9 am and 9 pm. This gives you the choice to walk in when it better suits you. It can be at the start or at the end of your day. No appointment needed here. The friendly technicians at Covid Test Center @ Paseo will take your information as we

are aware it is imperative that this shows accurately on the results. For a seamless process, please verify that you have provided the correct email to deliver the certificate. Said certificate can be printed at our offices should you wish to do so.

We understand that nobody enjoys doing a nasal swab. That is why we take pride in our reputation of being the gentlest swabbers on the island. First, we will not rush you just to go to the next in line. Through clear given instructions we want you to feel comfortable. When you are ready, we will promptly but tenderly take a proper sample. Many elsewhere traumatized people praise the difference it makes to test with us. Forget about counting hours before your flight, our turnaround is fast! For travel to the US, for example, a day before will suffice. A great game plan is to test first, then head out for an evening of dining, shopping and entertainment at the Paseo Herencia Mall, home of the water and lights show in the evenings. By the time you are back at the hotel, your results will be ready in your inbox.

A PCR test costs \$75 and results are ready the next day, while Antigen test costs \$35 with same day results. If you are staying at an off-high-rise area property, you can benefit from the free parking our customers receive at the mall lot.).

For more information follow us on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter. □



Taste limitless possibilities at Infiniti, where Chef Urvin Croes and his team explores without boundaries and steps with both feet outside of the box to create his most sensational dishes yet. This meticulously designed restaurant located inside Blue Residences on scenic Eagle Beach is a chef's table concept with limited seating where diners are able to interact with the staff and other guests alike throughout the evening.

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Acrobatic group RCC Aruba wins bronze at the Budapest Circus Festival



ORANJESTAD – Minister Xiomara Maduro and Minister Dangui Oduber, received the acrobatic group RCC for a brief encounter for the promotion they gave Aruba while abroad.

The acrobatic group RCC was on tour in Budapest, Hungary, from October to December 2021. In January 2022, RCC competed in the International Budapest Circus Festival, the world's third-biggest international circus festival, and finished with the bronze medal. It is a momentous achievement since it is the very first time these acrobats have competed against top circus artists from big countries like Italy, Russia, Hungary, Spain, Ethiopia, Cuba, and Ukraine. In addition to the bronze medal, the RCC won a special prize. A renowned family in the circus world presented this award for the most admired group by the public. The RCC group received multiple offers from interna-

tional circuses to perform. Their first tour for 2022 will start in July in England, where they will perform for three months in the Hippodrome Circus. In September 2023, they will participate in another International Circus Festival, and in October, they will resume their tour in Paris, France, with the Cirque d'Hiver Bouglione. The Cirque d'Hiver Bouglione was inaugurated by Prince Louis-Napoléon, only child of Napoleon III Bonaparte. RCC Aruba represents Aruba during all their presentations and carries the name of Aruba with pride.

On behalf of the Government of Aruba, Ministers Maduro and Oduber thanked the young acrobats, Mr. Diego Emilio Garzon Sierra, Mr. Juan Camilo Aguillon, Mr. Jhon Freddy Badillo, Mr. Juan Felipe Marin Rios, and the directors Mr. Diego Jaramillo Ospina and Mrs. Yamila Hernandez Ramirez for their great efforts and for promoting Aruba. □

Adaptation of check-in time for all group color codes

ORANJESTAD – As informed by Aruba Airport Authority N.V. (AAA), the company that manages and operates Aeropuerto Internacional Reina Beatrix (AUA Airport) as of December 1, 2021, all US departing passengers are allowed access to the check-in terminal based on groups and color codes for each group at the airport as part of the "Passenger Flow Control" for all passengers to the USA.

Further adaptations have been made to make the process more agile and to better indicate the 3

hour time frame between scheduled departure time and allowed check-time. The time frame for check-in for the YELLOW group has now been adapted to be between 08:00 – 12:00 hrs (8 AM – 12 noon). The time frame for the BLUE group has also been further adapted to now be allowed to check-in between between 12:00 and 14:00 hrs (12 noon and 2 PM). The ORANGE check-in time frame has also been adapted to now be between 14:00 hrs and 16:00 hrs (2 PM – 4 PM).

The Passenger Flow Control concept entails that

passenger are allowed to enter the check in facilities based on separate groups (Yellow, Blue and Orange) established by the scheduled airline departure times. Passengers will thus receive a dedicated timeslot to enter the terminal as indicated in table below.

This dedicated timeslot is determined for visitors based on the information provided in the ED (Electronic Disembarkation) Card where information on the departure flight will also have to be submitted. Residents travelling out of Aruba to the US should take

ARUBA AIRPORT Departure Check-in Times Quadrant by Group			
GROUP	YELLOW	BLUE	ORANGE
DEPARTURE TIME	Between 11:00 - 15:00	Between 15:00 - 17:00	Between 17:00 - 18:00
CHECK-IN	Between 08:00 - 12:00	Between 12:00 - 14:00	Between 14:00 - 16:00
<p><i>Note: For check-in times, please maintain this at 2 hours prior to scheduled departure time</i></p> <p><i>For example:</i> scheduled departure time is 13:00 hrs = check-in time 10:00 hrs</p> <p style="text-align: right;">scheduled departure time is 15:00 hrs = check-in time 12:00 hrs</p> <p style="text-align: center;">scheduled departure time is 17:00 hrs = check-in time 14:00 hrs</p> <p style="text-align: center;">scheduled departure time is 18:00 hrs = check-in time 15:00 hrs</p> <p><i>*For flights that are scheduled to depart between 17:00 hrs and 18:00 hrs, those check-in counters will close 60 to 75 minutes before the scheduled departure time. As such code ORANGE has a check-in time frame between 14:00 hrs - 16:00 hrs (2PM - 4PM).</i></p> <p><i>Period: December 1, 2021 - March 12, 2022</i></p> <p><i>If flight is delayed, please maintain your scheduled departure time</i></p>			

their scheduled departure time into account to determine at what time they are allowed to check-in (not earlier than 3 hours before that time of departure).

AUA Airport will have ambassadors at the entry doors to actively control the time slots per passenger. Early passengers will have to wait outside for their correct time slot. □

Aruba signs new "cooperation framework" with the UN

ORANJESTAD - The Government of Aruba recently signed the "United Nations Multi-Country Sustainable Development Framework (MSDCF)" agreement for the Caribbean for 2022 to 2026.

The framework serves as a guideline for the collaboration of the United Nations within the region, including Aruba for the upcoming 5 years, to support countries with their recovery from the

Covid-19 pandemic while working on sustainable development without leaving anyone behind.

It was during a hybrid ceremony held on February 11, 2022, that the Prime Minister of Aruba signed for the Government of Aruba, and Mrs. Marina Walter, Resident Coordinator of the UN-based at the UN House in Trinidad and Tobago, signed on behalf of the UN. The UNDP, UNEP, UNFPA, UN Women, IOM, PAHO/

WHO, UNDSS, UNIC, FAO, and ILO also attended the signing ceremony.

Walter and other UN Country Team members praised the Government of Aruba for its contribution to the design process of the "Cooperation Framework", and for reinforcing its commitment to the United Nations.

Walter stated that: "the Cooperation Framework represents a new era of

cooperation between the UN and the Caribbean and provides a solid foundation on which the UN can continue to support the Government of Aruba in their objective of reaching the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals".

Prime Minister Wever-Croes stated that Aruba is committed to the SDGs. We are anxiously waiting to implement the framework, and Aruba is eager to continue

on its path of becoming a more resilient island.

The MSDCF identifies four cardinal aspects as a priority to achieve the SDGs in the region;

1. Economic resilience and shared prosperity;
2. Equality and well-being;
3. Resilience to climate change and shocks, and sustainable natural resource management;
4. Peace, safety, justice, and the rule of law. □

In Your Debt: Money red flags can make or break a couple

By **SARA RATHNER** of **Nerd-Wallet**

When it comes to money and relationships, we're all a bit like Goldilocks — this ex spent too much, this ex was too cheap. It can be a long, difficult search for someone who is just right. Even in a long-term relationship, you can be unpleasantly surprised by someone you thought you knew well. Carla Marie Manly, a clinical psychologist and author in Santa Rosa, California, witnessed her then-husband get served with a collection notice for a debt she didn't know about. He tried to explain it away, saying he forgot to tell her about the issue and it wasn't a big deal.

"My gut instinct said, 'No, there's more to this story,'" Manly says. (Reader, she eventually divorced him.) A lot of life decisions that couples make together have money at their core, so you need to know whether your partner's personal choices will cause problems for you both. Money red flags don't have to be relationship-enders. In fact, they can be an opportunity to emerge stronger than ever, provided you're both willing to be honest and do the work to get your relationship to a better place. Here's what doing the work entails.

FIGURE YOURSELF OUT

Maybe you break up with someone the moment they admit to having money-related skeletons in the closet. Maybe you stick it out, even when your partner exhibits serious lapses in judgment.

Everyone's boundaries are



In this June 15, 2018 file photo, twenty dollar bills are counted in North Andover, Mass.

Associated Press

influenced by past experiences. It's worth examining your boundaries' origins because they may not be serving you well. Are you punishing a new partner because of the actions of an ex? Do you set unrealistic expectations to make up for your spendthrift parent? In cases like these, you're reacting to other people's values instead of living according to your own. By setting your own values, you can bring your true self into a relationship — instead of a pile of baggage.

"Without that foundation of honesty and transparency, you knowing you, you communicating that to the other person, you'll have nowhere to go," Manly says. "Your relationship won't grow."

EXERCISE THOSE MONEY-TALK MUSCLES

When you can both speak honestly without the fear of judgment, you can tackle issues as a team and emerge with a stronger bond. When dating, start small by sharing a financial decision you made for yourself. When you're together longer, you can discuss and jointly make lower-stakes money choices as practice for the more serious stuff. If something makes you uncomfortable, mention it so you can talk about why that might be the case.

And remember, even if your partner has money habits you don't agree with, don't treat them like a rebellious teenager. If you scold them, they're going to become secretive about their spending.

"Everything should be able to be worked through if there is mutual respect and

love for one another," says Tiffany Welka, a financial adviser in Livonia, Michigan. "If you have those things in your relationship, realistically, hard things are going to come up, and you have to learn to overcome them together."

DON'T IGNORE WARNING SIGNS

When the red flags are flapping in hurricane-force winds, it doesn't matter how much you love someone. Here are some signs you may be in a potentially unhealthy situation:

— YOUR PARTNER WON'T TALK ABOUT MONEY:

"One of the biggest things that I've found is that if someone is unwilling to discuss their finances with you, that's a really big red flag," Welka says. "It means that they're hiding a part of their life and they want to keep it separate from the rela-

tionship."

— YOUR PARTNER HAS AN OVERLY POSITIVE ATTITUDE:

Positivity can be a bad thing when it's a defense mechanism used to avoid dealing with serious issues like overdue bills. "The reality is that we all have good and bad things happen to us in our financial life," says Ed Coombs, a financial therapist near Charlotte, North Carolina. In Coombs' view, when you can reflect on your money choices and acknowledge both what you're proud of and what you're ashamed of, it's a sign of financial maturity.

— YOU SEE SIGNS OF DISHONESTY:

Sometimes this behavior can be caused by deep negative emotions about money that go back to childhood. But your partner can hurt you financially by withholding information, taking money out of joint accounts without your knowledge, and secretly getting into debt.

— YOUR PARTNER EXHIBITS CONTROLLING OR ABUSIVE BEHAVIOR:

Your partner may deny you access to money, forbid you from working, hide money in secret accounts or steal your identity. According to the National Network to End Domestic Violence, financial abuse occurs in 99% of domestic violence cases.

— THEY REFUSE TO RESOLVE ISSUES:

It's not promising when your partner won't work with you to problem-solve. Consider it a sign that your time together may have run its course. "That's a difficult place to get to," Coombs says. "But sometimes it's necessary." □

Justice Dept. to take on exploitation of supply chain issues

By **MICHAEL BALSAMO**

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department is launching a new initiative aimed at identifying companies that exploit supply chain disruptions in the U.S. to make increased profits in violation of federal antitrust laws.

The program, being unveiled Thursday by the Justice Department's antitrust division and the FBI, comes amid ongoing sup-

ply chain struggles and labor shortages in the U.S. that have plagued retailers since the coronavirus pandemic began.

Justice Department lawyers worry that companies may "seek to exploit supply chain disruptions for their own illicit gain," the department said. And, if that's the case, the Justice Department and the FBI will prosecute antitrust violations they uncover, the department says.

Those violations could include agreements between individuals and businesses to fix prices or wages or to rig bids, prosecutors say.

The U.S. government also has formed a working group focused on supply chain collusion — meant to share intelligence and detect global schemes — with officials in several other countries, including the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and Can-

ada.

"Temporary supply chain disruptions should not be allowed to conceal illegal conduct," said Assistant Attorney General Jonathan Kanter, who runs the Justice Department's antitrust division.

"The Antitrust Division will not allow companies to collude in order to overcharge consumers under the guise of supply chain disruptions." □

CROSSWORD

By THOMAS JOSEPH

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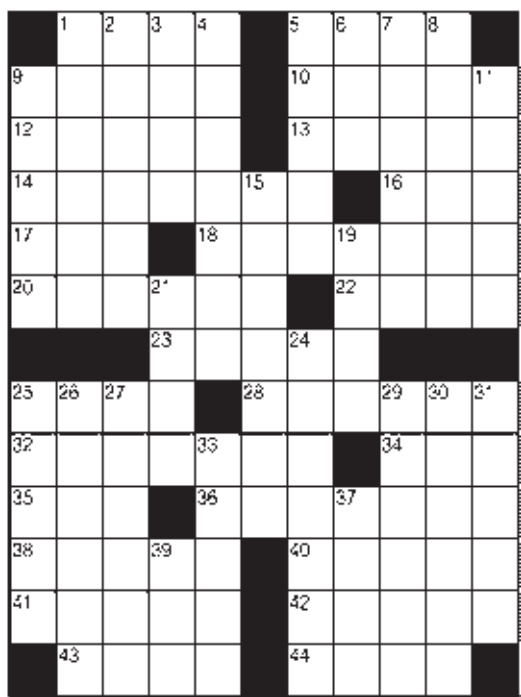
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Yesterday's answer



2-19

AXYDLBAAXR
 is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used
 for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters,
 apostrophes, the length and formation of the words
 are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

2-19

CRYPTOQUOTE

M U V G C M H K M Q P K N R Y V M J

P C T A V N O P A P O Z N J K D V G O .

T W J N J N R M U V G ' R Y V M J

R J N G G . — M S J V N S P A N Q M A V G

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: HE IS TRULY WISE
 WHO GAINS WISDOM FROM ANOTHER'S
 MISHAPS. — PUBLIUS SYRUS

A mild U.S. flu season is waning, but is it really over?

NEW YORK (AP) — This winter's mild flu season has faded to a trickle of cases in much of the U.S., but health officials aren't ready to call it over.

Since the beginning of the year, positive flu test results and doctor's office visits for flu-like illness are down. But second waves of influenza are not unusual, and some experts said it's possible a late winter or spring surge could be coming.

"The question we're asking ourselves now is: 'Is this it, or is there more to come?'" said Lynnette Brammer of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. COVID-19 cases have been falling, leading to a decline in mask wearing and behaviors that may have been keeping flu down this winter. As people are less cautious, flu or other respiratory viruses can surge, Brammer said.

Indeed, some indicators of flu activity have inched up the last couple of weeks: a count of flu-related hospitalizations and the percent of specimens from patients with respiratory illnesses that test positive for flu.

Limited data on who is testing positive for flu suggest about two-thirds are kids and young adults. Kids have driven flu's spread in past years, so "it's quite possible we could see continued increases," Brammer said.



A man receives a flu shot in Brattleboro, Vt., on Tuesday, Oct. 26, 2021.

Associated Press

Dr. Angela Branche, a University of Rochester infectious diseases specialist, called the flu season unusual.

"I don't have any (flu) cases in my practice this week," she said recently. Normally, doctors in Rochester would be diagnosing 50 to 100 flu cases a day around this time of year.

It seems like the current flu season is "easing to the finish line," said Dr. William Schaffner, a Vanderbilt University infectious diseases expert. But viruses can be unpredictable.

"As the flu-ologists like to say, 'if you've seen one flu season, you've seen one flu season,'" he said.

Last winter's flu season was virtually non-existent. Experts credit mask wearing, social distancing, school closures and other mea-

sures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Some doctors were nervous about how things would go this winter, wondering if last year's lull would cause flu immunity to wane. Also, fewer children and adults got flu shots this year, according to preliminary CDC data.

The worry seemed to be legitimized by an early November flu outbreak at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where more than 700 cases were reported. The illnesses were caused by a certain version of flu — called Type A H3N2 — that traditionally leads to more hospitalizations and deaths, particularly among the elderly. Worse, many of the infected kids were vaccinated, and investigators concluded the shots offered low levels of protection.

That strain later became the main cause of flu illnesses across the country. But this season has nevertheless turned out to be tame. That was a surprise, said Dr. Edward Belongia, a flu expert at the Wisconsin-based Marshfield Clinic Research Institute.

"We have occasionally seen other very mild flu seasons, but not where H3N2 is the dominant strain. That's what really makes it odd," he said.

The season peaked in December, just as COVID-19 cases surged, driven by the more transmissible omicron variant, Branche observed.

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Officials: Florida plan has fed manatees 25 tons of lettuce



An adult and young manatee swim together in a canal, Wednesday, Feb. 16, 2022, in Coral Gables, Fla.

By CURT ANDERSON

Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. (AP)

— The unprecedented human effort to feed starving Florida manatees has so far provided the lovable marine mammals with more than 25 tons of lettuce, officials said Wednesday. The round-tailed, snout-nosed animals popular with locals and tourists have suffered a major die-off because their preferred seagrass food source is disappearing because of water pollution from agricultural, urban, septic tank and other sources.

Officials say the feeding program involving donated romaine lettuce at a Florida Power & Light plant on the east coast is attracting about 300 to 350 manatees per day. It's been as many as 800 manatees at times, sometimes less than 60 as they move around the waterways.

"We're making a difference," said Ron Mezich of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission during an online news conference Wednesday. "It gives us the greatest exposure to the greatest number of animals."

Last year, a record 1,101 manatee deaths were recorded, largely from star-

vation. The typical five-year average is about 625 deaths. So far this year, 164 manatee deaths have been listed, only five from collisions with boats, according to state wildlife commission statistics.

"We've seen an uptick in mortalities," said Tom Reinert, FWC south regional director and spokesman for the state-federal effort to save manatees. "We are adjusting our program to get as much food to manatees as we can."

Normally, wildlife experts advise against feeding wild

animals because they begin to associate humans with food. And it remains a crime for a person to feed manatees on their own, although officials say many people want to help.

The best way is to donate money, they say, through a sponsored entity, and to make sure to report any sick or struggling manatee. "Feed them with your dollars," Reinert said.

Looking at the big picture, there are an estimated 8,800 or so manatees in Florida waters. That's a big improvement from the

roughly 2,000 animals in the 1990s, part of the reason they were delisted from endangered to threatened by the federal government. But even with this unusual die-off, Reinert said there's only a 1% chance of manatees becoming extinct in the wild any time soon. The key will be restoring seagrass beds, which is a long-term project funded by \$8 million in state dollars so far. "You can't just go out and plant a bunch of seagrass," he said. "Projects are getting started and are in the planning stages." □

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Editor

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Assistant Director

Xiomara Arends

Editors

Pilar Flores

Liza Koolman (Management assistant)

Richard Brooks

Sales

Liza Koolman

Sulaika Croes

Classifieds

classified@cspnv.com

Distribution and Collection

accounting@bondia.com

Social / Website

Juan Luis Pinto

Columnists

Anthony Croes

Weststraat 22

T: 582-7800

E: news@arubatoday.com

W: www.arubatoday.com

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From hippies to hipsters, 'Texas Chainsaw' is back

By JOCELYN NOVECK
AP National Writer

Et tu, pause button? I thought you were my friend.

Anticipating the inevitable guts and gore and murderous mayhem, I screened Netflix's new "Texas Chainsaw Massacre" on my TV in broad daylight, with sunlight streaming through the windows and the comforting din of traffic below, and with the remote in my hand throughout, ready to hit "pause" to delay the really bad stuff.

But things dragged and I got complacent, and sure enough, that pause button was too far away when I really needed it — a truly shocking moment I did not see coming. I won't reveal when this moment arrives, but if your plan is to be saved by your own pause button, well, good luck!

Despite that admirably executed shocker of a scene, though, the question does arise not long into this, the 10th movie in the "Chainsaw" oeuvre: Did we really need another? And sadly, given the lack of imagination, creativity or even basic attention to logic in a perfunctory and downright silly script, the answer seems a resounding "Nope."

Unless you just want to see a lot of chainsaw killing. Be-



This image released by Netflix shows a scene from "Texas Chainsaw Massacre."

Associated Press

cause, there is that.

The new installment, directed by David Blue Garcia with a screenplay by Chris Thomas Devlin, is billed as a direct sequel to the original, meaning we're supposed to forget the eight intervening movies. OK, done! The 1974 film, directed by Tobe Hooper, has been called disgusting and disturbing, but also a classic of the genre. The plot involved a group of young people — hippies, this being the '70s — who happened on the remote Texas property of

a troubled family of cannibals. Out came the chainsaw. Only a young woman named Sally survived.

From hippies... to hipsters. In 2022, we have a group of idealistic 20-something entrepreneurs from Austin, who decide that Harlow, Texas, essentially a ghost town, is the ideal place to buy up and gentrify. They arrive to organize things just before a busload of their investors comes rolling in, ready to party.

There's Dante (Jacob Latimore) and girlfriend Ruth

(Nell Hudson). And then there are the two most fleshed-out characters (pardon the pun) in the film: Melody (Sarah Yarkin), Dante's partner in the venture, and her teen sister, Lila (Elsie Fisher) who we learn is the emotionally scarred survivor of a school shooting. (The brief scenes that reference this shooting seem gratuitous — even in a slasher movie.)

Things don't go smoothly. Upon arrival, they enter a building they've bought, an old orphanage, and

discover its elderly, sick caretaker (Alice Krige) lives there with "her last boy" and refuses to leave. The hipsters call the cops to force her out. Bad idea. The "last boy" is tall and scary and wears masks of human skin which is not his own.

Yup, it's Leatherface, now played by Mark Burnham (silent but physically, um, imposing.) He's a lot older but still has the chainsaw — in fact, it's the original chainsaw from 1974. And he's angry. Also, Sally (Olwen Fouéré) is still alive. She, too, is angry.

Alas, this is all you get in terms of plot — this, and some half-baked ideas that die after a few lines. Turns out — surprise! — a chainsaw is a durable instrument, and its efficacy in the hands of Leatherface doesn't seem to have changed in 48 years.

Nor has much else. A half-century of social and technological development hasn't made much of a mark. Yes, there's a GPS in the car, and the young people have smartphones and Instagram. And that's about it. All this may still be enough for diehard fans. In any case, at least the above-mentioned smartphones create the one, and the ONLY, funny moment of the movie. □



This cover image released by Philomel Books shows "Welcome to the Big Kids Club: What Every Older Sibling Needs to Know" by Chelsea Clinton and illustrated by Tania de Regil, available Sept. 13.

Associated Press

Chelsea Clinton to launch children's book series this fall

NEW YORK (AP) — Chelsea Clinton has a lot of publishing plans — for her own books, and for books by others.

The Penguin Young Readers imprint Philomel Books announced Friday that Clinton has a new picture story, "Welcome to the Big Kids Club: What Every Older Sibling Needs to Know!", coming Sept. 13. The book is illustrated by Tania de Regil. At the same time, she will launch and provide introductions for a nonfiction chapter book series for kids ages 6-9, "Save The ...", about animal conservation.

"Welcome to the Big Kids

Club' is a reflection of conversations I've had with my kids and so many other kids about what it means to have a baby in the family," Clinton, the mother of three, said in a statement. "I couldn't be more excited about this book and the newest 'Save The' series. My hope is that young readers and their families will enjoy and learn as much from the books in this series as I have, whether about whale sharks, frogs or more animals that could disappear if we don't all work together to save them."

The "Save The" series will begin in September with three books: Sarah L. Thompson's

"Save the ... Elephants," Christine Taylor-Butler's "Save the ... Tigers" and Anita Sanchez's "Save the ... Whale Sharks."

Clinton, the daughter of former President Bill Clinton and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, has previously written such bestsellers as "She Persisted: 13 American Women Who Changed the World" and "She Persisted Around the World: 13 Women Who Changed History." She has a picture book coming out March 1, "She Persisted in Science: Brilliant Women Who Made a Difference," with illustrations by Alexandra Bolger. □

Gu's global coming-out party ends with 3rd Olympic medal

By **BERNIE WILSON**

AP Sports Writer

BEIJING (AP) — Eileen Gu turned the Beijing Olympics into her own personal playground.

In the city. In the mountains. Spinning, flipping and flying above three different venues.

The American-born Gu came into the Games hoping to win three gold medals in freestyle skiing while representing China, where her mother was born. She didn't, but she did come away with two golds and one silver, making her the first action-sports athlete to win three medals at the same Olympics.

The 18-year-old Gu capped her global coming-out party Friday by winning the gold medal in women's halfpipe. She had such a big lead after two runs that she was able to take a carefree final run down the halfpipe.

"I was very emotional at the top and I chose to do a victory lap," Gu said. "Because I felt like, for the first time, I like really deserved it and I really earned it."

She won the gold medal in the Olympic debut of women's freeski big air in front of an old steel mill in the city. She took the silver in slopestyle on the Secret Garden course, where elements were carved out of snow to resemble portions of the Great Wall. Finally, she dominated in the halfpipe.

Well known in China before these Games, she's now a household name back in the United States and around the world. Part of that had to do with the criticism she received for competing for China rather than the United States.

But a lot of it was due to her skill, confidence and personality.

If there's a face of joy at the Beijing Games, it's Gu and her ever-present smile. It was a remarkable contrast to the tears of Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva after her shocking litany of mistakes left the heavily favored teenager off the podium in women's figure skating, and the disap-



China's Eileen Gu competes during the women's halfpipe finals at the 2022 Winter Olympics, Friday, Feb. 18, 2022, in Zhangjiakou, China.

Associated Press

pointment and self-doubt of U.S. skiing superstar Mikaela Shiffrin after she failed to medal in any of the five individual races she entered.

Gu is also a model and her face is on advertisements all over Beijing. She's been photographed for Vogue, Victoria's Secret, Louis Vuitton, Tiffany and more. Born in San Francisco, she will enroll at Stanford in the fall. On Friday, she remained undefeated in the halfpipe with exceptional performances on her first two runs. She scored 93.25 on her first run and 95.25 on her second run.

"She has basically set a level that's pretty unattainable for a lot of us," said American Carly Margulies, who finished 11th.

She also has three stuffed Bing Dwen Dwen mascots that are given to all medalists. The mascots are so

popular that people stand in line for hours in the city trying to buy one. Gu got into the spirit of the Beijing Games by wearing a furry panda hat on the podium.

MEN'S SKICROSS

Ryan Regez led a 1-2 finish by Switzerland in the Olympic skicross final at Genting Snow Park, taking the lead early and never giving it up. He raised his arms in triumph after finishing the course filled with jumps, bumps and rolling terrain. Teammate Alex Fiva finished with the silver medal and Russian athlete Sergey Ridzik grabbed the bronze.

SPEEDSKATING

Thomas Krol won gold in the 1,000 meters, giving the Netherlands its third straight Olympic speedskating title in the event. The Netherlands earned its fifth gold medal in 12 events in Beijing with one day of competition remaining. Laurent Dubreuil of Canada took silver and Haavard Lorentzen, the 2018 silver medalist, earned bronze.

BIATHLON

Johannes Thingnes Boe of Norway dominated throughout and stayed composed during the four shooting stages to win the

gold medal in the men's mass start race.

Justine Braisaz-Bouchet of France used strong shooting and great skiing to win the women's mass start race.

CURLING

Brad Gushue is returning to Canada with a bronze medal in men's curling and John Shuster is going home to the United States empty-handed. Gushue won the gold medal 16 years ago in Turin and Shuster won it four years ago, helping to popularize curling in the United States.

The Canadians capitalized on a missed final shot by Shuster in the second-to-last end that turned a one-point edge into an insurmountable 8-5 lead.

Sweden and Britain will play for gold Saturday.

MEN'S HOCKEY

The Russians and Finland will meet in the gold medal game Sunday. The defending champion Russians beat Sweden 2-1 in a shootout, and Finland defeated surprise semifinalist Slovakia 2-0.

Ivan Fedotov made 34 saves in regulation and overtime against Sweden and six more in the eight-round shootout, and Anton Slepyshev scored in regulation. Former NHL forwards Nikita Gusev and Yegor Yakovlev and New Jersey Devils prospect Arseni Griyuk scored in the shootout. Tournament MVP candidate Sakari Manninen scored his fourth goal of the Olympics for Finland, and former Florida Panthers goaltender Harri Sateri made 28 saves for the shut-out of Slovakia. The Finns are looking for their first Olympic gold medal.

Slovakia will play Sweden for the bronze. It is going for its first hockey medal of any kind since the breakup of Czechoslovakia. □



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